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Gilpatric/JFK/DE Questions on the JSCP

In the spring of 1961 Harry Rowen told me that after my briefing to McGeorge Bundy in January, Bundy told him he had called the Director of the Joint Staff of the JCS [Joint Chiefs of Staff] and asked him to send over a copy of the JSCP [the Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan, the JSC annual operational plan for general and limited war]. The Director told him, "Oh, we can't release that."

Bundy said, "The President wants to read it."

The Director said, "But we've never released that. I can't."

Bundy told him, "You don't seem to be hearing me. It's the President who wants it."

"We'll brief him on it."

Bundy said, "The President is a great reader. He wants to read it."

It was finally agreed, Harry told me, that the President would get the JSCP and a briefing by a member of the Joint Staff.

Soon after I had finished drafting the BNSP [discussed earlier: Basic National Security Policy, the Kennedy Administration guidance for the general war plans that would totally revise the Eisenhower guidance], Rowen and I were talking to Roswell Gilpatric [Deputy Secretary of Defense] in his office in the Pentagon, and Gilpatric remarked to me, "By the way, we finally got the JSCP."

He said that instead of sending it over to the White House, the Joint Staff had finally negotiated that they would give a briefing on it in Gilpatric's office. McNamara had attended and McGeorge Bundy came over from the White House.

I asked him if they had seen an actual copy of the plan, after all. He said yes, the briefer had left the plan with Gilpatric. I asked if I could see it.

Gilpatric led us into his safe. Instead of a safe with drawers, he had a long closet that had been converted into a bank-like vault with a heavy steel door. It had a tall ceiling and reinforced walls lined with library shelves filled with documents stamped Top Secret and higher. He found a document lying on one of the shelves near the front and handed it to me.

It didn't look to me like the JSCP. That was quick to see, because it was typed on regular 8x10 paper, not the thick 11x14 legal-sized pages of a finished JCS document. But they might have

just retyped it on regular-sized paper for the Deputy Secretary. I looked immediately for the key section that appeared nowhere else but the JSCP, the part the JCS had taken such care to withhold from civilians, the definition of general war. It wasn't there. There was no Definition section, no definition of General War or Limited War.

I looked back to the first page and read the heading. It didn't say, Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan. It said, "Briefing on the JSCP."¹

I told Gilpatric, "This isn't the JSCP. Is this all they gave you?"

He looked for once taken aback, confused. He said, "Yes, it is. But I'm certain they told me it was the JSCP, they were leaving me a copy of the JSCP. Are you sure it isn't?"

"It's not the JSCP." I showed him the title. "It's a copy of the briefing they gave you." I mentioned the size of the paper and told him about the crucial part that was missing. Evidently they had left that out of the briefing. There might be more they had omitted.

He seemed more embarrassed than angry. He said, "They told me they'd be glad to answer any questions we might have from the

briefing and the paper. Would you take this and write out some questions for me to send to them?"

I took it back to the room I was working in in Harry's set of offices and put it in the safe. Then I walked down to an office in the Air Staff and asked the colonel who had originally shown me the JSCP if I could borrow a copy again. I didn't tell him what it was for, and he gave it to me without any questions.

Within minutes I was back in my office with the paper that Bundy and McNamara had been unable to get.² I put it on a table next to the copy of the briefing from Gilpatric and began to compare them line by line. I made a list of the discrepancies and then began to draft questions. It took me a week of long days to finish them.

Since they were supposedly coming from Gilpatric who hadn't been given the JSCP, I had to find a way to draft the questions so they would appear to be based only on the briefing paper. Each numbered question started with a reference to a statement in the briefing paper and then presented a list of sub-questions purporting to relate to it, a), b), c)...

But anyone who knew the JSCP would know that the person writing those questions for Gilpatric had to be intimately familiar with the JSCP itself and all the controversies that lay behind it,

and probably had a copy of it sitting in front of him. The JCS would know immediately that a copy had finally found its way to the Office of the Secretary of Defense and that someone from a military staff or who had been well educated by others with access to the Joint Staff was advising the Deputy Secretary. That was OK with me.

That was the message. The questions were the message. They were intended to leak into the JCS the news that their process, their conflicts and compromises and maneuvers, had become transparent to OSD [Office of Secretary of Defense: the Secretary, Deputy and Assistant Secretaries and their staffs]. I hoped they would figure the game was up.

The first question was: "You say that each operational plan is submitted for review and approval to the next higher level of command.

"a. Was the JSCP 1961 [the version in the briefing, which became operational in July 1960] submitted to Secretary of Defense Gates for his review and approval?

"b. When in the annual planning cycle is it customary to submit the JSCP to the Secretary of Defense for his review and approval?"

Correct answers to these questions would have been "a. No.

b. Never." It would not have been easy to explain those answers. And it was obvious that the drafter of the questions knew that.

Each question, still more the whole set, was chosen to convey that the drafter advising Gilpatric knew, in the idiom of military planners, "where all the bodies were buried." It would be clear not only that "He's got it; he's got the JSCP" but that he knew, somehow, why it was written the way it was, where the controversies were and how they had been papered over, and just what it would be hard or impossible for them to answer.

There was really no good way for the JCS or its staff to respond to these questions. If they lied or evaded, they would be found out. But if they answered truthfully, it would seem appropriate to send at the same time letters of resignation.

Bob Komer, McGeorge Bundy's deputy at the NSC, put that more strongly. After he read the draft I showed him in his office next door to the White House, he said to me, "If these were Japanese generals, they would have to commit suicide after reading these questions."

When I handed the list to Gilpatric, he glanced through it, nodded his head and said appreciatively, "These are very...penetrating questions." He read it over more carefully, shook his head several times, thanked me warmly and sent it off to

the Joint Staff with a cover letter and without any changes.

The American generals and admirals who got the questions did not commit suicide, but they did get the message. In a season when military staffs were working night and day to meet the Secretary's short deadlines on numerous studies, this was the one set of questions that was simply never answered at all. As the first deadline approached the Director of the Joint Staff asked for an extension, and when time ran out on that he asked for another, then a third. When I raised the question in a meeting with Gilpatric, they still had not made a formal reply. (They never did).

"That's perfect," Gilpatric told me. "We'll just leave them hanging there. Then if they fight us on the new plans, we'll just say, 'Well, then, let's go back to a discussion of your old plans.' And we'll start with those questions again."

Meanwhile, my revised guidelines were signed by the Secretary of Defense, sent to the JCS as Secretary of Defense Guidance on War Planning, and eventually became the new policy.

But one question had a different treatment. It was picked out of my list by Bob Komer at the White House and sent to the JCS as a Presidential query. And this question, to my surprise, got a quick, specific and apparently accurate answer.

The question was: "If existing general war plans were carried out as planned, how many people would be killed in the Soviet Union and China alone?"

In posing that question, my guess was that the JCS had never calculated an up-to-date answer to it for the current operational plans, which called for the quick and reliable destruction of a target system that included every major city in the Soviet Union and China.³

So I thought that the JCS would probably have to admit that they didn't know. Or they would have to ask for more time to calculate an answer. Either of these would put them very much off balance in defending their current plans against our proposed alternatives. "What, you don't even know the consequences of your own plans for human fatalities?" It was to make that as embarrassing as possible that I drafted the question to cover the Soviet Union and China alone, so that they couldn't pretend that they needed extra time only to calculate answers for fatalities in Albania.

I thought it was also possible that they would turn out a hasty answer which could probably be shown to be absurdly low. The only estimates I had ever seen in war plans had that character. They were from the early Fifties and ranged from about one million dead in the Soviet Union up to ten or fifteen million dead in plans

a few years later. I had read those as ridiculously low even for the era of A-bombs (which were already, by that time, very much larger than the Hiroshima/Nagasaki weapons).

New underestimates would serve the same purposes in the inner bargaining over the plans as no estimates at all. The possibility that the JCS would come up quickly with a realistic estimate was one I barely considered at all.

I was mistaken. So were the usually knowledgeable colonels I had consulted. Not only did some section of the Joint Staff have a plausible computer model for calculating such effects, but they supplied the White House with an answer almost immediately, within a day or two. It was classified "Top Secret--For the President's Eyes Only," but since I had drafted the question Komer called me over to the NSC offices to look at it.

The answer was in the form of a graph, a rising line that related fatalities on the vertical axis, in millions of deaths, against time on the horizontal axis, in months from the time of attack. The number rose to reflect delayed radiation deaths from fallout after the attacks. (I had only asked for fatalities, not for casualties which would included wounded and sick). The lowest point of the graph, starting at the left-hand side of the chart, gave the number that would die in the first few days of our attacks. The highest number, at the right-hand side of the chart,

showed the cumulative number killed by our attacks within six months after the execution of the plans.

The lower number was 275 million. The higher number was 325 million dead.

This was for the Soviet Union and China alone, which was all that I had asked. But the speed of their response suggested that they had an existing computer model and that they probably had estimates on hand for other areas as well. So it proved. I drafted a follow-up question covering areas contiguous to the Sino-Soviet Block, and the Joint Staff provided comprehensive estimates with equal dispatch.

Another hundred million or so would die in the Eastern European satellite countries from the attacks contemplated in our war plans, many of which were on air defenses and military installations in the satellites.

Fallout from our surface explosions on the Soviet Union, the satellites and China would decimate the populations of the neutral nations bordering these countries--e.g., Finland, Sweden, Austria, and Afghanistan--as well as Japan and Pakistan. Given prevailing wind patterns the Finns, for example, would be virtually exterminated by the fallout from surface bursts on Soviet submarine pens near their borders. These fatalities from U.S. attacks, up to

another hundred million depending on wind conditions, would occur without a single U.S. warhead landing on the territories of these countries outside the NATO and Warsaw Pacts.

Fallout fatalities inside our Western European NATO allies from U.S. attacks against the Warsaw Pact would depend very much on climate and wind conditions. As a general testifying before Congress had recently put it, these could be up to a hundred million allied deaths from our attacks "depending on which way the wind blows."

All this was without considering the effects of Soviet nuclear attacks in this context on the U.S., Western Europe and U.S. bases elsewhere. In other words, it didn't include the effects of Soviet retaliation to a US first strike. As I had intended, the JCS had clearly interpreted the phrase "if your plans were implemented as planned," to mean "if U.S. strategic forces struck first, and executed their planned missions without disruption from a Soviet preemptive strike." These figures clearly presumed that all or most US forces had gotten off the ground with their weapons without having been attacked first, i.e. that it was the US that was initiating allout nuclear war.⁴

U.S. intelligence estimates credited with Soviets with over a hundred ICBMs at that time, of which they claimed to be able to locate, and thus to target, only a small fraction. Estimates of US

fatalities from Soviet retaliation consistent with those estimates would have had to add scores of millions of US dead even from a very effective US first strike, up to a hundred million or more.

In fact, the Soviets had only four ICBMs operational throughout 1960 and 1961, so there might well have been no direct Soviet retaliation at all on the US, unless some Soviet cruise missiles on submarines at sea escaped our attack submarines. However, there were already several hundred intermediate and medium-range missiles aimed at West Europe. Even after a very effective US first strike, Soviet retaliation to the attacks postulated could have added, at the least, scores of millions to the West European death-list, possibly very much more.

The total death-count from our own attacks, in the estimates supplied by the Joint Staff, was in the neighborhood of 600 million dead, almost entirely civilians. A hundred Holocausts. The greater part inflicted in a day or two, the rest over six months.

I remember holding that graph in my hand and looking at it in an office of the White House Annex in the Executive Office Building on a spring day in 1961. I thought, "So they knew!" I remember thinking: This piece of paper should not exist. It should never in the course of human history have come into existence.⁵

END-NOTES

1. Even that went beyond the terms of the earlier JCS directive I had seen which told the Joint Staff that "neither the title Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan nor the initials JSCP are to be used in correspondence with the Office of Secretary of Defense." That directive went on that if it was necessary to refer a question relating to the JSCP to the Secretary of Defense or to quote a passage from the JSCP in official correspondence outside the JCS, that passage should be retyped on letter-size paper, omitting all references to the JSCP, and reference made instead to "capabilities planning."

That phrase was a euphemism, a cover, as was even the official title "...Capabilities Plan," meant to obscure from the Secretary and his Deputy and their civilian staffers that there existed a single, highest-level annual operational plan for the conduct of general and limited war, the authoritative guidance for all lower-level operational war plans.

Even though the official title was deliberately vague so as not to convey that this is what it was, if the Secretary or a civilian working for him was to see this phrase in caps or the letters of its acronym in a document, he might ask what it meant, and he might be told the truth. Then he would ask to see the plan, and then, the JCS' nightmare. Civilians claiming to work for the President would be reviewing the planning and demanding changes in it.

A vague reference to "issues arising in capabilities planning," which the JCS directive prescribed, gave them no handle to ask for a specific document, or a hint that there was an overriding piece of paper that would be worth their while to read. This particular briefing went beyond that and used the forbidden initials "JSCP" apparently because Bundy's call to the Director had revealed that that cat was out of the bag. Someone had leaked, the name at least. But it wasn't yet clear that the White House or the Secretary's office knew more than that, the contents of the plan and their implications, and the JCS hadn't yet given that up.

2. There were some advantages to being from RAND. The Air Staff thought of us as one of them. But in this the colonel I was talking to knew that I was working for the Secretary, which would normally have meant for the enemy, as serious an adversary as the Navy or Congress. He had to have gotten the approval of his boss, a brigadier general, to have shown me anything. I gathered that what was true for my friend the colonel must also be true for his boss.

They disagreed with the policy embraced by the highest levels of the Air Force, wanted to see it changed, and were using me as channel to the civilian authorities to make an end-run around their own superiors.

3. That might seem a peculiar supposition, but I had a basis for it. Despite my knowledge of the war planning process and the plans themselves, which was very extensive and virtually unique for a civilian, I had never seen such an estimate. Colonels I worked with in war planning staffs had never seen one either, and they believed it did not exist. And it was easy for someone familiar with the military bureaucracy to imagine bureaucratic considerations that would have blocked it from ever being investigated, having to do with a fear of leaks and with the use that Service rivals could make of realistically horrific figures for the current plans or else of obviously slanted estimates.

4. I knew from countless planning documents and talks with planners that US military commanders secretly expected to "take the initiative" against Soviet nuclear force and the whole rest of the target system under the most likely circumstances in which general nuclear war might arise.

That didn't mean they were planning a "preventive war," a strike out of the blue like Pearl Harbor marking the end of peacetime relations and the onset of crisis or war. The JSCP presumed that general war was most likely to arise from a series of escalating actions and reactions none of which was initially intended to lead to allout war. For example, it mentioned the possibility of an uprising in East Germany, in which West German NATO forces became involved. But if such conflict escalated to an overwhelming attack on Western Europe by Soviet conventional (non-nuclear) forces, our commitment to NATO had always been based on a presumption that the US would initiate nuclear warfare.

The Eisenhower JSCP presumed much than that. If a reciprocal spiral of action and reaction, originating in Berlin or an uprising anywhere in East Europe or a conflict over Yugoslavia or Iran, led to a sizeable engagement of US and Soviet forces, involving a division or so of troops, that was general war and the plan called for allout nuclear war to be initiated by a US first strike on the Soviet Union and China.

Of course, two other possibiities were that the Soviet Union would launch a preventive nuclear war out of the blue, or that it would be the Soviet who would first cross the nuclear threshhold in an escalating conflict, either with tactical nuclear weapons or strategically. But given their actual perceptions of the nuclear balance, which were grossly different from "missile gap" estimates in official intelligence estimates leaked to the public, military

planners put either of these contingencies as very much less likely than allout nuclear war initiated by the US.

5. What threw me into shock was not the estimate, which was obviously realistic, but that the Joint Chiefs of Staff were aware of it, that their planning process was not so mindless of overall consequences as I had come to suppose, and that they felt they could afford to be so candid on this answer, so responsive, realistic, prompt, while they stalled on all the others. Far from suicides or resignations, in this case there was not even delay or evasion, no shame, apology, no apparent feeling of any need even to explain the answer to the new President. It was uncanny.

I thought, This was what the U.S. had come to, sixteen years after Hiroshima. Plans and preparations, awaiting only Presidential order to execute (and, I'd discovered, not needing even that in certain circumstances) for whose foreseen and calculated consequences the term "genocidal" was inadequate.

A hundred Holocausts, on command. These plans had been worked out, in all detail, by the colonels I worked with, the men I drank beer with after work. This was what they all worked on during the day. And I along with them. I had already thought, reading war plans during the previous year, that I was looking at the way the world would end. Plans for destroying the world of cities, civilization, that someday would be carried out. But I had thought that none of the others reading or writing them had faced up to that.

In 1961 no one, not I nor the JCS, nor Edward Teller or Herman Kahn, knew of the danger of nuclear winter: the possibility that the cities targetted in the existing plans, set afire, might take much else with them; that smoke and soot from the burning cities could cover the Northern Hemisphere and perhaps the globe and blot out the sunlight, lowering temperatures enough and long enough to break ecological chains, freeze the water and destroy the crops, adding billions of fatalities by famine, disease and cold to the casualties of blast and firestorm, perhaps ending all life on earth.

What gave me my sense of urgency was not a fear that all life was threatened. It was, by these very plans, but I didn't know that for more than twenty more years, nor did anyone else. My urgent concern, which was as great then as it ever was later, came from my awareness of the direct threat to the cities themselves, to what Edward Teller emphasized was "at most one quarter of the earth's population."

It didn't enter my head then that the piece of paper in my hand should be given to the Congress, or the press, or the world's public. It was stamped "For the President's eyes only." I wasn't supposed to be seeing it myself, and standing in the NSC offices I

didn't even try to copy it for my own files, as I might have done in the Pentagon. But it confirmed me in my mission; these plans had to be changed, quickly.